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Moral judgments and impressions

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Moral psychology is booming and recent years brought a large body of research on moral judgments and impressions. We review up to date results about this important constituent of human morality focusing mainly on: (1) how deontology vs. utilitarianism drives moral judgments, (2) what is the role of intuition and deliberation in moral judgments, (3) how and why morality influences impressions of persons, and (4) how people perceive moral character. We also highlight some limitations of previous research and show how these limitations are being overcome recently.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2015, 6:50–54

This review comes from a themed issue on **Morality and ethics**

Edited by **Francesca Gino** and **Shaul Shalvi**

[doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.03.028](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.03.028)

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Introduction

Moral judgments and impressions are tremendously important. In everyday situations, they heavily influence interpersonal attitudes thereby deciding on who people approach or avoid. In extreme situations they may decide about life or death. Moral experiences (and judgments) are also surprisingly frequent. Hofmann and coworkers [1**] studied a large sample of adults with ecological momentary assessments. Out of more than 13 thousand assessed events, 29% involved acts interpreted in moral terms with participants being involved in the act either as an agent or a target, witnessing it, or learning about it from others. No wonder that moral judgments and impressions constitute a blooming field of research. We review recent developments in the field.

Moral dilemmas

Is it morally permissible to torture a terrorist in order to extract information about a nuclear attack that would kill a million citizens? Or — more generally — does the end justify the means? This problem has been studied with moral dilemmas, like the classical trolley problem, where

participants are asked to imagine a run-away trolley which is about to kill five persons working on a railway track. Participants may choose to either do nothing or use a switch diverting the trolley onto a side track but killing a single person working there (the switch version). In a slightly different scenario, participants may either do nothing or push a large man off a footbridge to stop the trolley thereby killing the man but saving the five workers (the footbridge version). Killing a person in order to save five others is a utilitarian choice, whereas doing nothing is a deontological choice driven by the conviction that it is wrong to kill a person even if for the greater good of saving many others. Studies with thousands of participants showed an enormous prevalence of utilitarian choices and judgments (85%) in the switch version and an equal prevalence of deontological judgments (88%) in the footbridge version [2]. Although the logical problem remains the same in both versions, neuroimaging studies showed that the footbridge version incited stronger emotions than the switch version [3,4]. Further, patients with emotion-related damage in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex showed unusually high utilitarian judgments [5].

These findings led Greene and colleagues to formulate a double-process account of deontological vs. utilitarian moral judgments [6,7]. Whereas deontological judgments are driven by affective processes which are fast and automatic, utilitarian judgments are driven by cognitive processes which are slow and effortful, requiring motivation and cognitive resources. A substantial amount of data supports this model [8]. Deontological judgments become more frequent when people are under time pressure or lack working memory capacity, when they empathize with victims or imagine their harms vividly. Utilitarian judgments become more frequent when people have less contact with the victims, prefer a deliberate thinking style or have been primed with the rational mode of judgments.

The dilemma method, however, has a drawback because deontological and utilitarian judgments are pitted against each other, and the two inclinations are not measured independently. This problem has recently been cured by adopting a process dissociation procedure [9] that allows for independent assessments of deontological and utilitarian inclinations basing on a larger pool of dilemmas [10**]. Both inclinations appeared related to the strength of moral identity, but only the deontological one was related to empathic concern, perspective taking, and increased under an empathy instruction. The utilitarian inclination was uniquely related to the need for cognition and decreased under cognitive load.

Intuitions vs. deliberations

The dispute between deontological and utilitarian judgments is a specific case of a larger intuitionism–rationalism debate on whether moral judgments are driven by fast and effortless intuitions resembling perception or by slow and thoughtful deliberations resembling reasoning. There is ample data evidencing both processes. Moral judgments are made instantly (within 250 milliseconds) [11] even when the persons judging cannot explain them [12] or are unable to do so because they are preverbal infants or toddlers [13,14*]. Changes in emotional states influence moral judgments even when the factual information about a judged act is held constant, for example, an experience of unrelated disgust increases the harshness of moral condemnation [15]. On the other hand, reason may be easily liberated from the passions. Disgusting yet harmless acts, like masturbation with a chicken carcass, are evaluated in a milder way when participants are prone to emotional reappraisal, either habitually or because of recent priming to reappraise their emotional experience [16].

In his social intuitionist model, Haidt [17] proposed that moral cognition is typically a post hoc rationalization of responses driven by gut feelings of right and wrong. Moral foundations theory [18**] assumes that such feelings can be based not only on general principles (especially justice) and personal harms, but also on three other moral foundations of group loyalty, authority, and purity/sanctity. In effect, some acts may be judged as immoral even when they are harmless, because they break the group loyalty code (using a national flag to clean the toilet in private), or the authority code (slapping one's father face when playing) or the purity code (masturbating with a dead chicken). The dyadic theory of morality [19,20] offers an opposite view and assumes that lay perceptions of morality always involve a dyad including a moral agent who is responsible for ethically-relevant acts and a moral patient who experiences the consequences of the acts. In social perception people are type-casted to one of these roles, which tend to be mutually exclusive — agents (e.g. adults) are perceived as less capable of experiencing and patients (e.g. children) are perceived as less responsible for their actions. This theory also postulates the dyadic-completion phenomenon — when people see an act that is considered immoral, they automatically search for the harm and a victim, and when they see harm, they instantly search for a perpetrator. Indeed, recent research shows that even ostensibly harmless acts (e.g., masturbation or homosexuality) instigate implicit seeking for victims of those actions [21**].

Although moral judgments result from both intuitions and deliberations, the former are typically dominant because they are faster and effortless [6,17]. In effect, moral judgments are highly susceptible to egocentric biases that lead to moral disagreements. For example, when deciding whether equality (same payoff for everybody) or

equity (payoffs proportional to the amount of effort) was a better rule for money allocation in an economic game, participants chose the rule that brought them higher personal gains [22*]. People who lack material resources form harsher moral judgments because they feel more vulnerable to others' harmful behavior [23,24]. Observers of cheating for money evaluated such acts as immoral, but the same acts were evaluated as fairly moral when they served the observers' interests as well [25**]. When other participants merely imagined an identical act of dishonesty, their judgments failed to rise for the act serving their interest, suggesting that people are not aware of the self-interest bias [26]. This discrepancy between judgments of behaviors actually observed and merely imagined suggests serious limitations of imaginary dilemmas as a valid method of studying moral judgments.

Intuitions are not only affective, they also differ from deliberations in their basic architecture. Deliberative processes are based on semantic relations represented in a propositional format (e.g. Adam is honest) and produce judgments via syllogistic inferences (Adam would not cheat, even if tempted). Intuitive processes are based on associations that result from contiguity and similarity, and generate feelings based on spreading activation between associated elements [27,28]. Such feelings are typically affective, but not necessarily so. Some gestures are culturally associated with honesty, like putting the right hand over one's heart in Great Britain or Poland. Studies performed in the latter country showed that persons performing the hand over heart gesture were perceived as more honest than the same persons performing a control gesture [29]. Strikingly, an inadvertent performance of the gesture resulted in increased honesty in the performers' behavior — they lied and cheated to a lesser degree and this was not accompanied by any changes in affective states or awareness of the fact [30**]. These data suggest that also non-affective associations can serve as moral intuitions influencing both perception and behavior.

Moral dimension dominates person impressions

Although philosophers (and some psychologists) ask the question 'is this act right or wrong?' most lay persons (and other psychologists) may be more interested in another question 'is this person good or bad?'. This is because acts and their evaluations are fleeting while moral character is stable [31]. Numerous studies consistently found that morality (communion, trustworthiness) is the most important content in person impressions. Moral traits are instantly inferred from faces [32] and such traits show higher chronic accessibility, are more frequently looked for during impression formation and shape global impressions to a higher degree than other traits of similar valence [33]. Moral character is prominent even in obituaries

[34**] and is considered an essential ingredient of personal identity [35*]. This prominence of morality extends to perceptions of groups [36], business organizations [37], and brands [38].

Why should morality be so important in the perception of others? According to a functional account, social cognition is driven by motives and interests which differ when perceiving others or the self [39]. When perceiving others, the observer is concerned with their morality because he or she directly benefits from their moral acts or suffers from immoral ones. However, when the observer becomes dependent on others' agency in achieving her own goals, the prominence of morality is attenuated and others' competence acquires importance [40,41]. By the same logic, agency and competence are prominent in self-perception — whatever a person is doing he or she is the first to benefit from own competence or to suffer the lack of it. In effect, self-esteem is much more dependent on what people think of their agency than their morality [42,43] and this finding has been replicated on very large samples coming from different cultures, including collectivistic ones [44,45].

Perceptions of moral character

Person-centered approach to moral judgments [31] assumes that, in addition to being deontologists or utilitarian consequentialists, people are naïve virtue theorists who judge not only acts but also moral characters of their perpetrators. When judging character, people focus on acts especially informative in this respect (rare, extreme or costly behaviors), even if not extremely bad. For example, it is worse to attack people than animals. However, a man attacking his girlfriend's cat is perceived as a worse person than a man attacking the girlfriend, because cruelty to animals is a strong signal of immoral character [46,47]. Physically attacking people is worse than making racial slurs, but still the perpetrator of the latter is perceived as especially immoral, because bigotry is a stronger marker of bad character [48]. Similarly, the way of performing an act may be informative in addition to the act content. Actors who make immoral decisions quickly are perceived as morally worse than those who require prolonged deliberation [49].

Person-centered approach can explain some regularities which are seen as biases of moral judgments by other approaches. For example, there is a tendency to judge the negative, but not the positive side-effects of a decision as intentional [50]. When employees are harmed by their boss's decision (who aimed solely at self-promotion), they perceive the harm as intentional, but when they are benefited, they can see, correctly, their profit as a mere side-effect of the decision. This side-effect effect may emerge because employees draw strong inferences about the character of the self-centered boss, and this perception drives their assessments of intentionality, rather than

the other way round. Perceptions of character — not valence of observed actions — explain whether the outcomes of the boss's decisions are perceived as intentional [51–55].

Conclusions

A substantial part of research on moral judgment has a clear philosophical inspiration. For millennia, philosophers have pondered the question of how should people make moral judgments, arriving — of course — at contradictory conclusions. These philosophical origins proved to be a mixed blessing for psychological studies of moral judgments. The advantage is that philosophy provided initial models of moral judgment (though these were normative rather than descriptive) and ensured some communication and understanding between psychology and other disciplines. The disadvantage is that the trolley-like thought experiments are void of ecological validity, so it remains unclear to what extent these findings can be generalized to ordinary situations. Moreover, participants typically imagine, rather than face problematical situations and, as psychology knows very well, people frequently imagine one thing and do another.

Finally, most dilemmas are very atypical cases of moral choices because they deal with achieving right ends with wrong means, whereas in life such ends are typically completed by good behaviors — after all, lives are usually saved by caring for people, not by killing others. However, the field of moral judgments and impressions is clearly moving toward studying more realistic situations [56*,57–59,60**], which may lack the exotic drama, but are actually faced by our participants in real life. This is a welcome development.

Conflict of interest

Nothing declared.

Acknowledgments

Funding was provided to Bogdan Wojciszke by the Polish National Center for Science NCN grant 2012/04/A/HS6/00581.

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Using a variety of ingroups and outgroups in the competitive sports setting, the authors persuasively showed a novel phenomenon of double standard in evaluations of 'our leader's' transgressions. People forgive serious transgressions by ingroup leaders but not by other group members or outgroup leaders. This finding is important in understanding responses toward nonconformist ingroup leaders not only in sports, but also in politics and business.
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